

Back Cast

By Ron Wilson



A handful of years ago, while walking around trying to get some circulation back into my feet at a bighorn sheep release site in the badlands, I stumble across what seems to be a lot of droppings. The droppings are old, dried out, not even worth mentioning, really. I toe a few with my boot, noticed how they sort of look like something left behind by deer, but a little different, and then move on.

Turns out, the droppings were part of the story; part of the big, highly-detailed puzzle that is a bighorn trap and transplant operation. The droppings were from bighorns already living in the badlands, collected over time by a biologist and stored who knows where until they could be put into play. Scattered about the release site, the innovative welcoming mat was hoped to put the newcomers at ease – to signal that other bighorns live here, to make themselves at home.

It's hard not to be impressed by the attention to detail in a bighorn sheep trap and transplant operation. Who'd of thought to stockpile old sheep droppings?

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the reintroduction of bighorn sheep to the badlands. Appropriately, January's maneuver of moving 19 bighorns from Montana to western North Dakota is the 50th time State Game and Fish Department personnel have gone out-of-state to get stock, or artificially shuffled animals about the badlands.

Coordinating a bighorn transplant has to be a nightmare. Nothing can be left to chance. Nothing can be

forgotten. Brett Wiedmann, Department bighorn sheep biologist, equates running the show as to that of a wedding planner.

"Everything could be going perfectly at the wedding, but then you realize you've forgotten the chocolate-covered strawberries and the event is ruined," he said.

There's reason to worry, to double check everything, because something overlooked could – worse case scenario – kill sheep. "It takes months to pull one of these things off," Wiedmann said, "and you're never 100 percent certain that you've thought of everything."

I've only been on the back end of these maneuvers where bighorns have finally reached the badlands in western North Dakota, their new home away from home. I've watched as bighorns scrambled from stock trailers looking, for the most part, no worse for the wear. Their handlers, however, those people who helped in some way, or many ways, to get the bighorns from there to here, typically look like crud. Some have been at it for days, drinking bad road coffee, eating on the run, and maybe nursing a bruise or two inflicted by an understandably frightened and confused bighorn.

"You lay awake at night worrying about everything," Wiedmann said. "You worry about the things you can't control, like the weather, and you worry about the things you can control. No matter how many times I go over it in my head at night, I'm wondering what I've forgotten."

The chocolate-covered strawberries will haunt Wiedmann until the bighorns are standing sturdy on all fours in the badlands. "We do everything we can, the best way that we know how, but once they're out of the trailers and running free, it's up to the sheep," he said.

Prior to the January release, Wiedmann went on about how he needed to find a snowplow to be on call just in case a snowstorm hit and Department personnel couldn't get the bighorns back into the carefully-chosen release site. "A snowstorm

with no snowplow on hand could ruin it," he said. "I can't control a snowstorm, but I can do something about clearing a road."

Details. Details. Details.

"Orchestrating a bighorn transplant can be stressful and a lot of work, but I love it," Wiedmann said. "I sleep a lot better when it's over, though."

